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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**SUBORDINATING VALUES TO INTERESTS: CLEARING UP
CONFUSION IN OUR NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

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Course 5601
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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 1998		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1998 to 00-00-1998	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Subordinating Values to Interests: Clearing Up Confusion in Our National Security Strategy				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 6	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

President Clinton presents three “core objectives” in the preface to his 1997 *National Security Strategy*, these are to enhance our security with effective diplomacy and with military forces that are ready to fight and win, bolster America’s economic prosperity, and promote democracy abroad. As clarified later in the report, the President’s first two objectives are derived from language in the Constitution, which calls on government to “provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” The promotion of democracy abroad is presented as means of guaranteeing the American “way of life,” and thus could be linked to the realization of the Constitutional mandate quoted above.*

In developing its argument, the Clinton Administration defines the promotion of democracy as secondary in a hierarchy of interests. While creating this distinction, however, the authors fail to apply it consistently throughout the document. This weakens the conceptual framework of the overall statement.

In this essay, I review how the drafters present the distinction between “vital interests” and the promotion of American values. I argue that the Administration is less than clear in its presentation. The drafters advance the argument that values are subordinate to vital interests, but they purposefully avoid making unambiguous statements to this effect for political and bureaucratic reasons. This treatment of the issue weakens the *National Security Strategy* by complicating the identification of interests, and by confusing readers who attempt to use the *Strategy* to interpret or predict Administration actions. The document would be strengthened by a straightforward

* All references in this essay are to *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, D C: The White House, May 1997).

discussion of the ways that the promotion of democracy and other values are considered in the formulation of American foreign policy

The 1997 *National Security Strategy* describes an international environment in which the United States is the strongest single actor, but explicitly rejects the notion that American power is either absolute or unchallenged. The report speaks of U.S. leadership in "shaping" the world environment in a less risky, but more dynamic and uncertain world. This positive mission involves the promotion abroad of democratic political institutions and respect for human rights. The authors indicate, however, that this "shaping" must not come at the expense of interests defined as superior. In its section on "Responding to Crises," the Administration reports that "vital interests" are those of broad, overriding importance to the survival, safety and vitality of our nation. "Important national interests," by contrast, do not affect our national survival, and would be pursued only if "costs and risks are commensurate with the interests at stake." The drafters cite examples which suggest that the "core objective" of promotion of democracy falls within this second category.

While the distinction between vital and important interests is clearly drawn in some parts of the *National Security Strategy*, the report's authors decline to explicitly subordinate promotion of democracy and human rights to superior interests in their specific discussion of "Promoting Democracy." Rather, they review the "impressive" success of the Administration efforts to date, and outline the need to pursue further gains through both multilateral and bilateral initiatives. Despite the several acknowledgements (elsewhere in the text) that promotion of merely "important" interests depends on other

considerations, including cost, there is no direct discussion in this section of the interplay or possible conflicts between protecting vital interests and promoting values

The reasons that the authors avoid a frank discussion of the limits of promoting democracy are rooted in the internal politics of the Administration. Clinton's policy team has maintained close ties with groups whose sole purpose is the promotion and protection of values, both at home and abroad. Some political appointees in government charged with implementing policies designed to serve Clinton's third "core objective" are former officials from these groups.

The influence of officials who support a strong, value-driven U.S. foreign policy moderated as Clinton wrestled with complex foreign policy challenges in his years in office, but their political, bureaucratic and networking skills remain sharp. This acumen, supplemented by liberal use of guilt-inducing charges of that human rights policies are being "sold out" in favor of political or commercial concerns, enhance these officials' ability to control the drafting of policy documents outlining American foreign policy objectives. Hence, the "Promoting Democracy" section of the National Security Strategy, complete with repeated expressions of what the United States "must" do to advance this policy, is one of the more politicized segments of the report.

This section fails to address the question of when and why the United States might emphasize, or defer, the pursuit of policies designed to promote American values raised elsewhere in the Strategy. Why is this important? In making the distinction between "vital" and "important" issues, the drafters are providing a theoretical framework designed to help observers understand U.S. foreign policy choices. They

raise, but fail to answer, the question of how promotion of democracy relates to American vital interests

While promotion of democracy is our nation's third "core interest," Clinton's "six strategic priorities" for the next century do not even include that objective. What implications does this have for the formulation of foreign policy? Under what general circumstances will we allow merely "important" interests to be deferred, how will the Administration justify instances when human rights dominate our policy toward a certain nation or region?

The overly diplomatic wording of this document reflects serious differences in the Administration over these questions. Strategy debates have already contributed to costly policy reversals (e.g., Haiti, and the turnaround on China in 1994), and have led to charges of American hypocrisy and inconsistency in its conduct of foreign affairs. This lack of clarity in the Administration's latest *National Security Strategy* indicates that similar problems will emerge in Clinton's second term.

The *National Security Strategy* would be strengthened with a passage that better integrates its discussion of vital and important interests and the promotion of values. Such a paragraph would begin with an explanation of why we believe promoting American values abroad is in our own, and the world's, interest. Following this, we would lay out the differences between the promotion of values and the protection of vital interests. In particular, we would recognize that fostering commonly-held values in diverse nations is a long-term process, one that must primarily rely on persuasion, and one that must respect differences of views and systems to be successful. Our goal, in other words, is not to impose a "New World Order," or force nations to accept American-

style institutions. Finally, we should state that there are circumstances under which fostering values must be deferred because that goal conflicts with vital interests.

This more direct treatment of the distinction between vital and important interests would be a significant step toward reconciling Clinton Administration rhetoric indicating that values must play an important role in U.S. foreign policy and the confusing language in the current *National Security Strategy*. At present, promotion of democracy is listed as a “core objective,” but not as a “strategic priority.” Adding an explanation of this apparent contradiction will strengthen the *Strategy*’s conceptual framework, Administration policy-makers would be better able to assess challenges to our interests, and to explain policy choices to the American people and foreign observers.

There need be no “sell out” clarifying that foreign policy cannot be driven by the promotion of values does not mean that human rights concerns would never dominate our policy toward a certain nation or region. While some in the Administration would still strongly object to a statement explicitly assigning human rights a secondary role in some instances, the text of the *National Security Strategy* indicates that that battle has already been fought. Those advocating a strong role for value promotion should now contribute to the formulation of a framework which better explains when and how we will pursue our “third core objective.” Until then, Clinton’s foreign policy will continue to suffer from a lack of coherence.